

Swaziland

Embedded between Mozambique and South Africa, the kingdom of Swaziland is one of the smallest countries in Africa. What the country lacks in size, it makes up for in its rich culture and heritage, and relaxed ambience. With its laid-back, warm and personable people and relative lack of racial animosities, it's a complete change of pace from its larger neighbours.

Visitors can enjoy rewarding and delightfully low-key wildlife watching, stunning mountain panoramas, adrenaline-boosting activities and lively traditions. Swaziland also boasts superb walking and high-quality handicrafts.

Overseeing the kingdom is King Mswati III, one of three remaining monarchs in Africa. The monarchy has its critics, but combined with the Swazis' distinguished history of resistance to the Boers, the British and the Zulus, it has fostered a strong sense of national pride, and local culture is flourishing. This is exemplified in its national festivals: the Incwala ceremony and the Umhlanga (Reed) dance.

The excellent road system makes Swaziland easy to access and navigate. Accommodation includes a decent network of hostels, family-friendly hotels and upscale retreats. Many travellers make a flying visit on their way to South Africa's Kruger National Park, but it's well worth lingering here if you can.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 17,365 sq km
- **ATMs** Only in Mbabane
- **Borders** South Africa, Mozambique
- **Budget** US\$25 to US\$55 a day
- **Capital** Mbabane
- **Languages** English, Swati
- **Money** Lilangeni (E); US\$1 = E7.4
- **Population** 1.1 million
- **Seasons** Rainy (December to April), winter (May to August), drier and cool (September to November)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 268; international code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 2
- **Visa** Not required for most nationalities



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Mkhaya Game Reserve** (p1046) Spot black rhinos in the wild, one of Africa's great wildlife experiences.
- **Ezulwini and Malkerns Valleys** (p1044) Revel in a royal experience in the regal heartland of Swaziland and splurge on some handicrafts.
- **Usutu River** (p1046) Shoot the rapids or drift down the river through stunning gorges on a novel white-water rafting trip.
- **Malolotja Nature Reserve** (p1048) Trek in this tantalising reserve, a genuine, unspoiled wilderness.
- **Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary** (p1044) Wander through the peaceful wilderness and relax in its comfortable bargain lodges.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Summer sees torrential thunderstorms, especially in the western mountains, and temperatures on the lowveld are very hot, often over 40°C; in the high country the temperatures are lower and in winter it can get cool. Winter nights on the lowveld are sometimes very cold.

Try to avoid visiting rain-soaked Swaziland during the rainy season (December to April). The best time to visit is in May–June or October, but bring something warm.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** A half-day in Mbabane (p1042) is plenty to get your bearings. Spend two days poking around the pretty Ezulwini and Malkerns Valleys (p1044), including Lobamba (p1044), and make a trip into the relaxing Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary (p1044). If you have time and you want to see rare black rhinos in the wild, continue east to the stunning Mkhaya Game Reserve (p1046).
- **Two Weeks** Do the one-week itinerary, plus view wildlife at the extensive Hlane Royal National Park (p1046) and Mlawula Nature Reserve (p1046). On your circular route back to Mbabane, drop into Piggs Peak (p1047), an area known for its handicrafts, and take a detour to hike in Malolotja Nature Reserve (p1048), an unspoiled wilderness area.
- **One Month** You can absorb most of Swaziland in this time. Join the above two itineraries and take extra time out for

HOW MUCH?

- **Traditional dance/cultural group** US\$6.50
- **Internet** US\$4.50 per hour
- **Coffee** US\$0.80 to US\$1.70
- **Batik hanging** US\$8
- **Basket** US\$5

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.80
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.80
- **Bottle of beer** US\$1.10 to US\$1.50
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$11
- **Barbecued maize** US\$0.40

some action: hike in the Ngwempisi Gorge (p1045) and shoot the rapids on the Usutu (p1046). If Swaziland is in your month trip through South Africa, it's well worth diverting here.

HISTORY

In eastern Swaziland archaeologists have discovered human remains dating back 110,000 years, but the ancestors of the modern Swazi people arrived relatively recently.

During the great Bantu migrations into southern Africa, one group, the Nguni, moved down the east coast. A clan settled near what is now Maputo in Mozambique, and a dynasty was founded by the Dlamini family. In the mid-18th century increasing pressure from other Nguni clans forced King Ngwane III to lead his people south to lands by the Pongola River, in what is now southern Swaziland. Today, Swazis consider Ngwane III to have been the first king of Swaziland.

The next king, Sobhuza I, withdrew under pressure from the Zulus to the Ezulwini Valley, which today remains the centre of Swazi royalty and ritual. When King Sobhuza I died in 1839, Swaziland was twice its present size. Trouble with the Zulu continued, although the next king, Mswazi (or Mswati), managed to unify the whole kingdom. By the time he died in 1868, the Swazi nation was secure. Mswazi's subjects called themselves people of Mswazi, or Swazis, and the name stuck.

0 30 km
0 20 miles



European Interference

The arrival of increasing numbers of Europeans from the mid-19th century brought new problems. Mswazi's successor, Mbandzeni, inherited a kingdom rife with European carpetbaggers – hunters, traders, missionaries and farmers, many of whom leased large expanses of land.

The Pretoria Convention of 1881 guaranteed Swaziland's 'independence' but also defined its borders, and Swaziland lost large chunks of territory. 'Independence' in fact meant that both the British and the Boers had responsibility for administering their various interests in Swaziland, and the result was chaos. The Boer administration collapsed with the 1899–1902 Anglo-Boer War, and afterwards the British took control of Swaziland as a protectorate.

During this troubled time, King Sobhuza II was only a young child, but Labotsibeni, his mother, acted ably as regent until her son took over in 1921. Labotsibeni encouraged Swazis to buy back their land, and many sought work in the Witwatersrand mines (near Johannesburg) to raise money.

Independence

In 1960 King Sobhuza II proposed the creation of a legislative council, composed of elected Europeans, and a national council formed in accordance with Swazi culture. The Mbokodvo (Grindstone) National Movement, which was formed at this time, pledged to maintain traditional Swazi culture but also to eschew racial discrimination. When the British finally agreed to elections in 1964, Mbokodvo won a majority and, at the next elections in 1967, won all the seats. Swaziland became independent on 6 September 1968.

The country's constitution was largely the work of the British. In 1973 the king suspended it on the grounds that it did not accord with Swazi culture. He also dissolved all political parties. Four years later the parliament reconvened under a new constitution that vested all power in the king. Sobhuza II, at that time the world's longest-reigning monarch, died in 1982. In keeping with Swazi tradition, a strictly enforced 75-day period of mourning was announced by Dzeliwe (Great She-Elephant), the most senior of his hundred wives. Only commerce essential to the life of the nation was allowed. And that didn't

include sexual intercourse, which was banned, punishable by flogging.

Choosing a successor wasn't easy – Sobhuza had fathered more than 600 children, thereby creating hundreds of potential kings. Prince Makhosetive, born in 1968, was finally chosen and crowned King Mswati III in 1986.

Swaziland Today

The king continues to represent and maintain the traditional way of life and to assert his pre-eminence, for better and often for worse, as absolute monarch. Following his predecessor's style, Mswati dissolved parliament in 1992 and Swaziland was again governed by a traditional tribal assembly, the Likoqo. Since then, democratic reform has begun with the drafting – albeit restrictive – of a constitution. Despite the increasing agitation for faster change, even many reformers propose a constitutional king in a democratic system of government.

Currently, Swaziland's greatest challenge comes from the HIV/AIDS pandemic; the country has the world's highest HIV infection rate (almost 39% for adults between 15 and 49 years of age), and life expectancy has fallen as a result from 58 to 33 years. It's estimated that there are currently more than 70,000 AIDS orphans in the country, and by 2010 one out of six people will be a child under 15 who has lost both parents.

CULTURE

Swazis have an extremely strong sense of identity and pride. Social and cultural cohesion is maintained by a system of age-related royal regiments. Boys graduate from regiment to regiment as they grow older. This minimises the potentially divisive differences between clans while emphasising loyalty to the king and nation.

The nonconfrontational, good-humoured and religious Swazis dislike embarrassment of any kind. Although there is widespread dissatisfaction with the lack of progress in their country's current socioeconomic climate, they tend to dislike outsiders meddling in internal political and social affairs and cultural practices. Despite constant controversy around the king, he represents the symbolic head of the Swazi family and, as such, he is generally highly regarded – disrespect for him can be interpreted as a lack of respect for the identity of the Swazi themselves.

As in other parts of Africa, the extended family is integral to a person's life. While polygamy is permitted and exists this is not always practised. Traditional marriage allows for the husband to take a number of wives, although many Swazis also follow Western marriage conventions, rejecting polygamy, but permitting divorce.

Many people in rural areas continue to live in the traditional beehive huts in the traditional homestead arrangements.

Schooling is not compulsory, with the rate of attendance decreasing due to social circumstances, particularly due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

PEOPLE

Almost all people are Swazi (although there are about 70 distinct groups). The rest are Zulu, Tsonga-Shangaan and European. The dominant clan is the Dlamini – it's kind of equivalent to Smith, and you'll meet your fair share of them all over the country.

Around 70% of the population is Zionist, a mix of Christianity and traditional indigenous worship, with Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists making up the balance. Muslims, Bahai and Jewish faiths have small followings, also.

ARTS & CRAFTS

Swaziland's handicrafts include jewellery, pottery, weapons and implements. Woven grass-ware such as *liqhaga* (grassware 'bottles') and mats are popular, as are wooden items, ranging from bowls to knobkerries.

Dance and music is an integral part of Swazi cultural festivals. The Sibhaca dance is a vigorous foot-stamping dance performed by males.

ENVIRONMENT

Swaziland has a wide range of ecological zones, from rainforest in the northwest to savannah scrub in the east. Western Swaziland is highveld, consisting mainly of short, sharp mountains; the centre and east of the country are plains, where plantations of sugar cane dominate the landscape. Further east, the harsh Lebombo Mountains form the border with Mozambique.

Conservation can come from the most unlikely sources. The monarchy reserved some areas for hunting; these preserve the remnants of indigenous flora (including 14% of

the recorded plant life in southern Africa) and reintroduced animals (including elephants, warthogs, rhinos and lions) in parks such as Hlane Royal National Park, Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary and Mkhaya Game Reserve (these fall under the banner of 'Big Game Parks').

Swaziland has about a third of the non-marine-mammal species in southern Africa.

Environmental issues include overgrazing of cattle, soil erosion, illegal hunting and the loss of certain indigenous plants sought for natural medicines.

FOOD & DRINK

Swaziland isn't a gourmet's paradise, but you won't eat badly here. Tourist areas of the Malkerns and Ezulwini Valleys feature good international dishes and seafood. In more remote areas, African staples such as stew and pap (also known as *mealie meal*) are common.

MBABANE

pop 60,000

Mbabane (mba-*baa*-nay) is a pretty nondescript, although relaxing place; there isn't that much to see or do here. Its setting amid the Dlangeni Hills is picturesque, and in summer Mbabane is the place to be: the hills make it cooler than Manzini, which is why the British moved their administrative centre here in 1902. The adjacent Ezulwini and Malkerns Valleys have plenty of attractions.

ORIENTATION

Mbabane is a little disjointed. The main street is Gwamile St. Swazi Plaza, a large, modern shopping centre with most services and a good range of shops, is off Western Distributor Rd. The Mall, another shopping area, is on Plaza Mall St.

INFORMATION

Internet access is available in a few places in town, including The Mall.

First National Bank (Msundusa St)

Mbabane Clinic (☎ 404 2423; St Michael's Rd) Medical services.

Nedbank (Swazi Plaza) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Post office (Msundusa St)

Standard Bank (Swazi Plaza) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Tourist information office (☎ 404 2531; www.welcometoswaziland.com; ☎ 9am-4.45pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri, to 1pm Sat) On the edge of Swazi Plaza. Offers a selection

of free publications and brochures including the tourist Bible *What's Happening in Swaziland?* Alternatively, Swazi Trails in the Ezulwini Valley (see p1044) stocks tourist paraphernalia.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Mbabane is becoming unsafe at night, so don't walk around by yourself. Take precautions in the streets even during the day – muggings are on the increase.

SLEEPING

Good-value places to crash tend to be slightly out of the downtown area.

Grifters (☎ 404 5342, 617 0218; www.grifterslodge.com; End St; camp sites per person US\$6, dm US\$10, d with shared bathroom US\$23) This laid-back and likeably scruffy house, within walking distance of the town centre is a popular hang-out. Self-catering only. It has excellent facilities and also offers a range of hiking and cultural tours, including tours of local *shebeens* (drinking holes).

Thokoza Church Centre (☎ 404 6681; Polinjane Rd; s/d US\$26/29, with shared bathroom US\$17/22) These small, clean and monastic-style rooms might convert

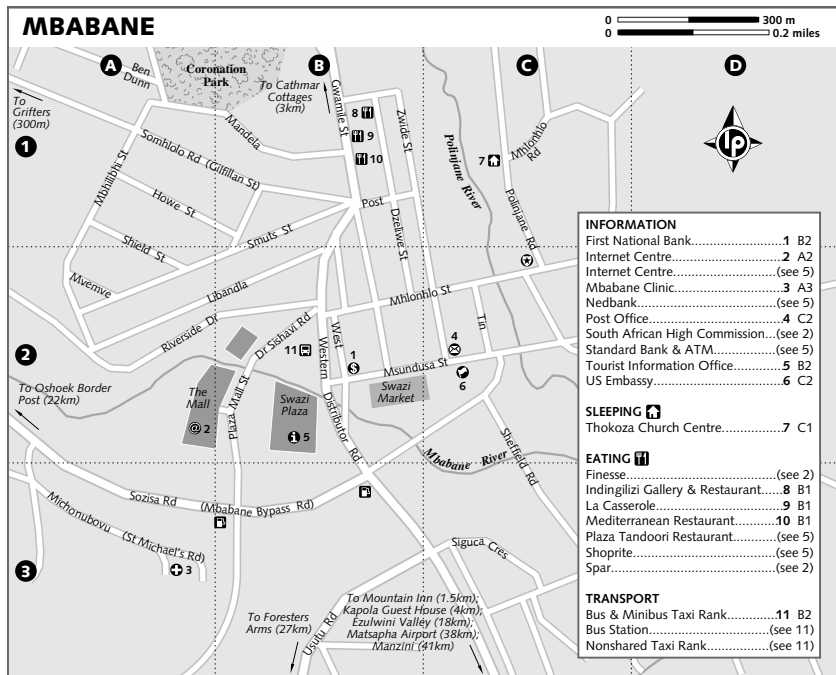
you to Mbabane. To get here from Gwamile St, turn onto Mhlonhlo St, cross the bridge, turn left at the police station and head up Polinjane Rd. Take a taxi at night (US\$3 from Swazi Plaza).

Cathmar Cottages (☎ 404 3387; www.swazilodgings.com/cathmar; 167 Likhlo St; r from US\$27-44; 🚗) Offers self-catering cottages and dolls-house-style cabins, about 3.5km north of Mbabane (off Pine Valley Rd).

Kapola Guest House (☎ 404 0906; www.kapola_edn.co.sz; s/d incl breakfast US\$54/89) A comfortable abode with massive porch, busy rooms and à la carte chef (meals US\$3 to US\$5). Five kilometres from Mbabane just off the MR3; watch for the wall painted with flags.

Foresters Arms (☎ 467 4177; www.forestersarms.co.za; s & d with half board from US\$61) Offers cosy oh-so British-style rooms and attractive gardens plus a smorgasbord of activities. Situated 27km southwest of Mbabane in the hills around Mhlambanyatsi.

Mountain Inn (☎ 404 2781; www.mountaininn.sz; s/d incl breakfast from US\$72/92; 🚗 📺 📶) Has colonial stains and great panoramas. The restaurant is open for all meals (mains from US\$6).



EATING

Gourmands are catered for, plus there are supermarkets at Swazi Plaza and The Mall.

Indingilizi Gallery & Restaurant (☎ 404 6213; indingil@realnet.co.sz; 112 Dzelwile St; snacks from US\$3; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-2pm Sat) This outdoor gallery-café serves snacks.

Plaza Tandoori Restaurant (☎ 404 7599; Swazi Plaza; mains US\$5-12; ☎ lunch & dinner) As well as great-value curries, the usual grills and burgers add a touch of the international.

La Casserole Restaurant (☎ 404 6426; Gwamile St; mains US\$7-11; ☎ lunch & dinner) A good stew with a mix of international tastes, vegetarian options, and wines.

Mediterranean Restaurant (☎ 404 3212, Gwamile St; mains US\$7-14; ☎ lunch & dinner) The bland atmosphere is spiced up by its Indian curries and Portuguese morsels.

Finesse (☎ 404 5936; The Mall; mains US\$10-14; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This fancy French-owned place serves a good range of seafood and meat dishes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibus taxis to South Africa (mostly north-bound) leave from the minibus taxi park near Swazi Plaza, where you'll also find buses and minibus taxis to destinations within Swaziland, including Manzini (US\$1), Big Bend (US\$2) and Pigg's Peak (US\$2). Any vehicle heading towards Manzini or Matsapha passes through the Ezulwini Valley, although most take the main – and newer – bypass road through the valley, as opposed to the valley's minor and more scenic routes. Non-shared taxis to the Ezulwini Valley cost at least US\$7, more to the far end of the valley (from US\$14), and still more at night. To Matsapha International Airport, expect to pay from US\$20.

GETTING AROUND

Nonshared taxis congregate near the bus rank by Swazi Plaza. At night you can usually find one near the City Inn.

AROUND SWAZILAND

EZULWINI & MALKERNS VALLEYS

The Ezulwini Valley – starting near Mbabane and extending down past Lobamba village, 18km away – is the homeland of Swazi royalty. Most of the area's attractions are near

Lobamba. It's a pretty valley with lush greenery, but it's becoming less picturesque with hotels and other development. The nearby Malkerns Valley is renowned for its handicrafts and is worth visiting.

Tourist information is available from **Swazi Trails** (☎ 416 2180; Mantenga Craft Centre) in Ezulwini Valley.

Sights & Activities

LOBAMBA

You can see the monarchy in action at the **Royal Kraal** in Lobamba during the Incwala ceremony and the Umhlanga dance (see Festivals & Events, p1049).

The **National Museum** (adult/child US\$3/1.50; ☎ daily) has some interesting displays on Swazi culture and a traditional beehive village. The **National Trust Commission office** (☎ 416 1151; www.sntc.org.sz), for information about Mlawula and Malolotja Nature Reserves, is here. (Note: the booking office is run from the Mantenga Nature Reserve reception office; see opposite.)

Next to the museum is the **parliament**, which is sometimes open to visitors. Across the road from the museum is a memorial to King Sobhuza II, the most revered of Swazi kings, plus a small **museum** devoted to him.

MLILWANE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

This beautiful and tranquil **private reserve** (☎ 528 3943; www.biggameparks.org; admission US\$2.50; ☎ 6am-5pm) was created in the 1950s by conservationist Ted Reilly.

While it doesn't have the drama or vastness of some of the South African parks, the reserve is easily accessible and worth a visit. Its terrain is dominated by the precipitous Nyonyane (Little Bird) peak, with some fine walks in the area. Animals include zebras, giraffes, warthogs, antelope species, crocodiles, hippos and black eagles (*Aquila verreauxii*).

Activities include horse rides (US\$14 per hour), mountain biking (US\$7) and wildlife walks (US\$4.50 per hour). Guides are recommended (US\$4.50 per person per hour).

The main entrance is 2km southeast of the Happy Valley Motel on the old Mbabane-Manzini road.

Sleeping

WITHIN THE SANCTUARY

Book the following through the **Royal Swazi Big Game Parks office** (www.biggameparks.org; ☎ 528 3943/4).

Sondzela Backpackers (IYHF) Lodge (☎ 528 3117; camp sites per person US\$5.50, dm US\$8, s/d with shared bathroom US\$14/22, s/d rondavels US\$21/28) Idle your time away in the great setting and facilities at the self-proclaimed 'Rolls Royce of Backpacker Hostels'.

Milwane Wildlife Sanctuary Main Camp (☎ 528 3943/4; s/d 2-person huts US\$33/47) This homely camp is set in a scenic wooded location about 3.5km from the entry gate. It boasts a large selection of shelters, including traditional, windowless beehive huts (s/d US\$31/44, with shared bathroom US\$21/33), camp sites for US\$6.50 per person or dorm beds in cabins for US\$11 per person.

Shonalanga Cottage (s/d US\$40/53, per additional person US\$15) A spacious self-catering cottage near the main camp. A good choice for families.

OUTSIDE THE SANCTUARY

Malandela's B&B (☎ 605 2598, 528 3448; r per person incl breakfast US\$25; 🍷) Along the MR27 in the Malkerns Valley, this offers stylish, ethnic African rooms, a pool and a sculpture garden.

Timbali Lodge & Country Park (☎ 416 2632; www.visitswazi.com; s/d incl breakfast from E400/500; 🍷 🍷) A moderately upscale place, at the western end of Ezulwini Valley, with self-catering cottages in pleasant, grassy grounds.

Mantenga Nature Reserve (☎ 416 1178; mantenga@sntc.org.sz; beehive huts per person US\$9, s/d tented chalets incl breakfast US\$43/65) Soft 'safari' adventure in delightful tented style and canvas comfort. The restaurant serves good luncheon dishes.

Eating & Drinking

Malandela's Restaurant (☎ 528 3115; entrées from US\$2, mains US\$4-9; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) Part of the Malandela complex and one of Swaziland's better restaurants.

Woodlands Restaurant (☎ 416 3466; mauriswazi@realnet.co.sz; mains US\$5-17; 🍷 lunch & dinner) International options to be enjoyed on a lovely shady veranda.

Quatermain's (☎ 416 3023; mains US\$8-11; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Mouth-watering culinary journey through Africa.

Calabash Continental (☎ 416 1187; mains US\$8-14; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Next to Timbali Caravan Park, with German and Swiss cuisine.

Bella Vista Pizzeria (☎ 416 1061; pizza from E32; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Bella Vista is at Happy Valley Motel and does a brisk local business.

Ezulwini Sun sometimes has music, food and drinks in the beer garden.

You'll rave about House on Fire, a fantastically decorated cultural and entertainment space at the Mandela Complex.

Getting There & Away

For the Manzini-bound bus from Mbabane, make sure the driver knows you want to get off in the valley. Even some nonexpress buses aren't keen on stopping. Nonshared taxis from Mbabane cost at least US\$7 – negotiate at night.

If you're driving from either Mbabane or Manzini, take the Ezulwini Valley/Lobamba exit off the bypass road. This puts you on the MR103, from where everything is well signposted.

NGWEMPISI GORGE

This **gorge** (☎ 625 6004), 30km south of the Malkerns Valley is one of the country's few remaining untouched environments with beautiful natural forests and the Ngwempisi River. Adventure seekers will be thrilled by the Ngwempisi Hiking Trail, a community-run 33km trail in the Ntfungula Hills on the Mankayane–Vleliziweni road.

The atmospheric double-storey **Khopho Hut** (dm US\$13) is built around massive boulders and Mhlabeni Hut is by a waterfall. It is compulsory to take a local guide (US\$7 per day plus an additional US\$1.50 for each hiker). You must carry in your own food and bedding, although porters are available from US\$2.50 per day.

MANZINI

pop 70,000

Manzini is the country's commercial and industrial centre. Downtown Manzini isn't large, but it feels like a different country from easy-going rural Swaziland. A hint of menace pervades; be careful at day and night as muggings are common.

The **market** (cnr Mhlakuvane & Mancishane Sts; 🍷 Mon-Sat) on Thursday and Friday mornings is excellent. Get there at dawn when the rural people bring in their handicrafts. Apart from this you can happily move on.

At the time of writing, the efficient, clean **Swaziland Backpackers** (☎ 528 2038; www.swazilandbackpackers.com; camp sites per person 45R; dm 90R; d with shared bathroom 190R), one of Swaziland's best backpackers, had just moved to a new premises on the edge of Malkerns Valley on the MR103 (behind Sundowner's Bar). If their

GO WILD!**Wildlife Drives**

For wildlife drives, the Big Game Parks reserves organise good-value tours. Mkhaya offers Land Rover day trips (US\$55, minimum two people, includes lunch). These trips must be prebooked through **Big Game Parks** (☎ 528 3943/4). Set arrival and departure times are 10am and 4pm. Hlane has a two-hour sunrise/sunset drive (US\$20, minimum two people); Mlilwane offers a shorter wildlife drive (US\$16, minimum two people). Check the website www.biggameparks.org for the latest on offer, as these do change.

White-Water Rafting

One of Swaziland's highlights is white-water rafting on the **Usutu River**. This largely sluggish river turns to rapids through the narrow Bulungu Gorge near Mkhaya Game Reserve.

At one stage you'll have to portage a 10m waterfall. The second half of the day is a sedate trip through scenic country with glimpses of the 'flat dogs' (crocodiles) sunning on the riverbanks.

Swazi Trails (☎ 416 2180; www.swazitrails.co.sz) offers a full-day trip (US\$84 per person, minimum two) including lunch and all equipment. Trips run from the Ezulwini Valley (see p1044).

past backpackers are anything to go by, the new site should also be one of the best options around. It offers activities, including a day tour of Swaziland (230R).

Tum's George Hotel (☎ 505 8991; www.tgh.sz; cnr Ngwane & du Toit Sts; s/d incl breakfast from US\$85/110; ☎) is Manzini's newest, fanciest and priciest hotel.

For food, takeaways abound in Bhunu Mall and Ngwane St or, for something more substantial and some OK coffee, try **Fontana di Trevi Pizzeria** (☎ 505 3608; the Hub, Villiers St; breakfast/pizza from US\$3/4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner).

A nonshared taxi to Matsapha airport costs around US\$8. The main bus and minibus taxi park is at the northern end of Louw St. Buses run up the Ezulwini Valley to Mbabane for US\$1.10 (35 minutes). Minibus taxis to Mozambique leave from the car park next to the 'old' KFC. Most long-distance minibus taxis (to South Africa, including Durban and Jo'burg, and Maputo in Mozambique) leave early in the morning.

MKHAYA GAME RESERVE

This top-notch **reserve** (☎ 528 3943; www.biggameparks.org) – off the Manzini–Big Bend road near the hamlet of Phuzumoya – was established in 1979 to save the pure Nguni breed of cattle from extinction. Its focus expanded to antelopes, tsessebe, elephants, and white and black rhinos. Mkhaya takes its name from the *mkhaya* (or knobthorn) tree – valued for their beer-brewing properties, and for the insect and birdlife they support.

You can't visit or stay in the reserve without booking in advance, and even then you can't drive in alone; you'll be met at Phuzumoya at a specified pick-up time, usually 10am or 4pm. While day tours can be arranged, it's ideal to stay for at least one night – this is possibly your best chance in Africa of meeting a black rhino in the wild.

You can bunk down at **Stone Camp** (all-inclusive s/d with full board US\$165/285), reminiscent of a 19th-century hunting camp, with accommodation in rustically luxurious stone and thatch cottages surrounded by bush. The price includes wildlife drives, walking safaris, park entry and meals, and is good value compared to many of the private reserves near Kruger National Park in South Africa. Reservations are through the **Royal Swazi Big Game Parks office** (www.biggameparks.org; ☎ 528 3943/4).

For day-trippers, the reserve organises a couple of good-value **safaris** (see above).

HLANE ROYAL NATIONAL PARK

In the northeast near the former royal hunting grounds, **Hlane Royal National Park** (☎ 528 3943/4; www.biggameparks.org; admission US\$3.50; ☎ 6am–6pm) offers wonderfully low-key wildlife watching. There are white rhinos and many antelope species. Elephants and lions have been re-introduced. There are guided walking trails (US\$5 per person), two-hour wildlife day drives (US\$20 per person, minimum two), a cultural village tour with dance performances (US\$6.20 per person, minimum four) and mountain-bike hire (US\$9 per hour).

Ndlovu Camp (camp sites per person US\$5.50, rondavels s/per person sharing US\$31/23, self-catering cottage per person sharing from US\$26) is a pleasant and rustic fenced-off camp, with no electricity, a communal area and a restaurant.

Bhubesi Camp (s/d cottages US\$27/54) offers self-contained huts with electricity. Book for both through the **Royal Swazi Big Game Parks office** (☎ 528 3943; www.biggameparks.org).

Minibus taxis to Simunye will drop you at the entrance to Hlane (US\$0.70; 7km from Simunye).

MLAWULA NATURE RESERVE

This tranquil **reserve** (☎ 416 1151; www.sntc.org.sz; adult/child US\$3.50/1.70; ☎ 6am-6pm), where the lowveld plains meet the Lebombo Mountains, boasts antelope species and hyenas, rewarding bird-watching, and the odd crocodile. You can hire fishing rods for US\$3 and bring your own mountain bike. Check the status of bilharzia (p1136) and watch out for ticks.

There's tented accommodation at **Siphiso camping ground** (camp sites per person US\$8.50) and **Sara Camp** (s/d US\$21). **Mapelepele Cottage** (accommodates 4 people US\$70) is self-catering. Book accommodation through the **National Trust Commission** (☎ 416 1151/78; www.sntc.org.sz) at the Mantenga Reserve office.

PIGGS PEAK

This small, gritty town in the northwest of the country is the centre of Swaziland's logging industry and there are huge pine plantations throughout the area. The town was named after a prospector who found gold here in 1884.

Sights

In addition to its scenery, including the **Phophonyane Falls** located about 8km north of town, this area is known for its handicrafts. Check these out at the Peak Craft Centre just north of Orion Piggs Peak Hotel & Casino. At Peak Craft Centre you'll find **Ethnic Bound** (☎ 437 3099; ethnicbound@africaonline.co.sz), **Likhwetzi Kraft** (☎ 437 3127) and **Tintsaba Crafts** (☎ 437 1260; www.tintsaba.com). There are also numerous craft vendors set up along the road up from Mbabane.

An interesting detour from Piggs Peak is to wind your way 20km through scenic plantation country to the ghost village of **Bulembu**, a former asbestos mining town. It's a true-life time warp; thousands of deserted corrugated-iron houses and many Art Deco buildings nestle on a pretty hilly landscape. Warning: asbestos (chrysotile) dumps exist around the village.

RHINO WARS

In 1965 white rhino were re-established in the kingdom after an absence of 70 years. That was the easy part. Since then there has been an ongoing battle to protect them from poachers. At the forefront of this battle has been Ted Reilly and a band of dedicated hand-picked rangers.

This defence wasn't easy, especially as the poachers had received hefty financial backing from crime syndicates supplying rhino horn to the lucrative Asian market. Poaching escalated in the late 1980s, and there were determined efforts to change rhino-poaching laws in Swaziland. Rhinos were dehorned and confined to enclosures for their own protection. After Hlane Royal National Park was attacked in January 1992 by poachers with AK47s, the rangers armed themselves. With the rhinos dehorned at Hlane, the poachers shifted to Mkhaya Game Reserve. The battle commenced.

In April 1992 there was a shoot-out between rangers and poachers at Mkhaya, and some poachers were captured. A follow-up operation led to another shoot-out at Big Bend in which two poachers were killed while selling their freshly poached horns. While the Swazi courts deliberated over action against the rangers relating to this incident, another rhino, the majestic bull Mthondvo, was killed for horn in December 1992. The young king, Mswati III, intervened on behalf of Reilly's rangers, and the poaching of rhinos came to a halt. The rangers, however, still wait with their rifles at the ready. You can help: your presence at any one of the big wildlife parks assists in rhino conservation.

In 1996 the Taiwanese government donated money to purchase six black rhinos; a gesture of good faith that was welcomed with open arms. The black rhinos, which were relocated from parks in KwaZulu-Natal, are breeding well.

Sleeping

Jabula Guest House (☎ 437 1052; www.swaziplace.com/jabulaguesthouse; s/d US\$31/52; 🏠) The best B&B in Piggs Peak with small, neat rooms in a residential setting – turn right at the Piggs Peak Clinic sign and then take the first right again.

Phophonyane Lodge & Nature Reserve (☎ 473 1319; www.phophonyane.co.sz; tents US\$68-97, s/d cottages with breakfast from US\$97/135) This stunning hide-away – in a nature reserve of lush indigenous forest on the Phophonyane River – is one of the best places to stay in Swaziland. Ring ahead for directions (you can usually arrange to be collected from Piggs Peak). Bring the mosquito repellent!

Getting There & Away

Roads in the northwest of the country are mainly dirt, but they're in reasonable condition. The minibus taxi stand is next to the market at the top end of the main street, with several vehicles daily to Mbabane (US\$2, one hour).

For Bulembu, you'll need your own wheels – this road can be boggy when wet.

MALOTJA NATURE RESERVE

A large piece of wilderness in the hilly northwest of this tiny country, this **nature reserve** (☎ 416 1151, 442 4241; www.sntc.org.sz; adult/child US\$33/1.70; 🕒 6am-6pm) is both rugged and largely unspoiled.

It's jumping with antelope species, more than 280 species of bird, and boasts wildflowers and **rare plants**. The **Komati River** cuts a gorge through the park and continues east in a series of falls and rapids until it meets the lowveld.

The reserve has one of the world's oldest known **mines**, where haematite and specularite were mined for cosmetic and ritual uses from 41,000 BC. You can visit the mine, but you must be accompanied by a ranger.

Hiking trails range from short day walks to a week-long jaunt, extending from Ngwenya in the south to the Mqwayiza Range in the north. For the extended trails, you must obtain a permit (US\$0.80) and a map from the reserve office. Bring all your own food and a camp stove as fires are not permitted outside the base camp.

Accommodation consists of **camping**, either at the well-equipped (but infrequently used) main site (US\$9), with ablutions and

braai (barbecue) area, or along the overnight trails (US\$6; no facilities). There are also self-catering wooden **cabins** (per person US\$32, children half-price), for six persons. Book through **Swazi Trails** (☎ 416 2180; www.swazitrails.co.sz) or with the **National Trust Commission** (☎ 416 1151/78; www.sntc.org.sz; Mantenga Reserve), both in Ezulwini Valley.

The entrance gate for Malolotja is about 35km northwest of Mbabane, along the Piggs Peak road (MR1); minibus taxis to/from Mbabane will drop you here.

SWAZILAND DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Many of the country's hotels are geared towards South African tourists and are pricey, but there are some good B&B-style options. Nearly all designated camp sites in Swaziland are in national parks and reserves. If you camp in rural areas always ask permission from local people.

ACTIVITIES

Swaziland's wildlife reserves offer some excellent walking and mountain biking. In the rainy season, white-water rafting is optimal (see p1046).

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Swaziland Embassies & Consulates

In countries without Swazi representation, contact the UK representative:

UK (☎ 020-7630 6611; www.swaziland.org.uk; 20 Buckingham Gate, London SW1E 6LB)

USA (☎ 202-234 5002; 1712 New Hampshire Ave, NW, Washington DC, 20009)

Embassies & Consulates in Swaziland

Diplomatic representation in Swaziland:

Mozambique (☎ 404 3700; Princess Dr, Mbabane)

South Africa (☎ 404 4651; The Mall, PO Box 2507, Mbabane)

PRACTICALITIES

- The *Times* (www.times.co.sz), and *Swazi Observer* are the country's English-language daily newspapers.
- Electrical plugs have three large round pins as used in South Africa.
- Swaziland uses the metric system.

USA (☎ 404 6441; <http://mbabane.usembassy.gov>; 2350 Mbabane Pl, Mbabane; ☎ 8.30am–12.30pm Mon & Thu, except for emergency services)

See p1050 for details on getting visas for onward travel.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Colourful ceremonies (and traditional dress, which is still commonly worn) underline the Swazis' unique identity.

Incwala ceremony Held sometime between late December and early January. Swaziland's most sacred ceremony, celebrating the New Year and the first fruits of the harvest in rituals of thanksgiving, prayer, atonement and reverence for the king. As part of the festivities the king grants his people the right to consume his harvest, and rains are expected to follow the ceremony.

Umhlanga (Reed Dance) A great spectacle in August or September, performed by unmarried girls who collect reeds for the repair and maintenance of the royal palace. It is something like a week-long debutante ball for marriageable young Swazi women and a showcase of potential wives for the king. On the sixth day they perform the reed dance and carry their reeds to the queen mother. Princesses wear red feathers in their hair.

The venue for both festivals is near Lobamba in the Ezulwini Valley. Ask at the tourist office in Mbabane for exact dates.

Photography is not permitted at the Incwala but is at the Umhlanga dance.

HEALTH

Malaria is a risk in the northeast near Mozambique; the threat is highest from November to April, although there have been serious eradication programs in recent years (using DDT). Swimming in still waters is risky because of bilharzia (for more information on these potentially deadly diseases, see the Health chapter, p1130). Crocodiles are present in some places.

HOLIDAYS

As well as religious holidays listed in the Africa Directory chapter (p1106), the principal public holidays in Swaziland are:

New Year's Day 1 January

King Mswati III's Birthday 19 April

National Flag Day 25 April

King Sobhuza II's Birthday 22 July

Umhlanga (Reed Dance Day) August/September

Somhlolo (Independence Day) 6 September

Incwala Day December/January

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet facilities are in Mbabane and a couple of places in the Ezulwini and Malkerns Valleys.

MAPS

Topographical maps (1:50,000) are available from the Surveyor-General's office at the **Ministry of Public Works** (☎ 404 6267; Mhlambanyatsi Rd, Mbabane). The Swaziland Tourism Authority has recently printed hiking maps of most of the popular hiking spots, including Shewula, Mlawula, Sibebe, Mlilwane, Mantenga, Mahamba, Ngwempisi and Malalotja.

MEDIA

There are two English-language daily newspapers: the *Times of Swaziland* and the *Swazi Observer*. The former is an independent, and frequently courts the wrath of government and royalty, the latter is owned by the 'nation' and toes a conservative line.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the lilangeni; the plural is emalangeni (E). It is tied in value to the South African rand. Rands are accepted everywhere and there's no need to change them. Emalangeni are difficult to change for other currencies outside Swaziland.

Only a few ATMs accept international credit or debit cards. The most convenient are at Standard Bank in Swazi Mall, Mbabane and inside the Royal Swazi Hotel's casino.

Nedbank and First National change cash and travellers cheques. Banking hours are generally from 8.30am to 2.30pm weekdays, and until 11am Saturday. Most banks ask to see the receipt of purchase when cashing travellers cheques.

TELEPHONE

To call Swaziland from South Africa dial the prefix 09-268. To call overseas from Swaziland, use the code 00. The best way to make international calls is with phone cards (US\$2 to US\$9) from post offices and shops.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Swaziland's main tourist information is in Mbabane. The websites of **Swazi National Trust** (www.sntc.org.sz) and **Royal Swazi Big Game Parks** (www.biggameparks.org) offer useful parks information. The privately run **Swazi Trails** (☎ /fax 416 2180; www.swazitrails.co.sz; Mantenga Craft Centre, Ezulwini

Valley, Swaziland) also has tourist information in its office.

VISAS

Most people don't need a visa to visit Swaziland. If you don't need a visa to enter South Africa, you won't need one for Swaziland. Anyone staying for more than 60 days must apply for a temporary residence permit from the **Chief Immigration Officer** (☎ 404 2941; PO Box 372, Mbabane) whose offices are in the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas for Mozambique are available at the borders but it's cheaper to arrange them in advance at the **Mozambiquan High Commission** (☎ 404 3700; Princess Dr, Mbabane) or Nelspruit (South Africa). Allow 24 hours.

TRANSPORT IN SWAZILAND

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Swaziland's main airport is Matsapha International Airport, southwest of Manzini. (Schedules and tickets often refer to the airport as Manzini.) **Swaziland Airlink** (☎ 518 6155/92; www.saairlink.co.za) flies daily between Swaziland and Johannesburg (US\$127 one way). **Swazi Express Airways** (☎ 518 6840; www.swaziexpress.com) flies four times a week to Durban (US\$63 to US\$175) and twice a week to Maputo (US\$21 to US\$63) and Vilanculos (US\$21 to US\$197) in Mozambique.

Land

BUS & MINIBUS TAXI

Generally speaking, Manzini has the main international transport rank for transport to Jo'burg, Durban and Mozambique. Less frequent departures are in Mbabane for the northern destinations of Gauteng and Mpumalanga (South Africa).

Mozambique

The main border crossing between Swaziland and Mozambique is at Lomahasha–Namaacha (open 7am to 8pm). The border crossing between Mhlumeni and Gobahas is open 7am to 6pm. Inquire at the tourist office in Mbabane about bus services from Mbabane to Maputo

DEPARTURE TAX

A US\$7 departure tax is levied at Matsapha International Airport.

(Mozambique). Minibuses depart Maputo daily in the morning for the Namaacha–Lomahasha border (US\$2, 1½ hours) with some continuing on to Manzini (US\$4.50, 3½ hours). Minibus taxis operate daily from Manzini to Maputo (US\$10, 2½ hours).

South Africa

The main border crossings with South Africa are: Josefssdal–Bulembu (open 8am to 4pm); Oshoek–Ngwenya (open 7am to 10pm); Emahlathini–Sicunusa (open 8am to 6pm); Mahamba (open 7am to 10pm); and Golela–Lavumisa (open 7am to 10pm).

The **Baz Bus** (☎ South Africa 021-439 2323; www.bazbus.com) runs from Jo'burg/Pretoria to Durban via Mbabane and Manzini three times a week, returning direct to Jo'burg/Pretoria on alternate days.

Minibus taxis run daily between Jo'burg (Park Station), Mbabane and Manzini (US\$20, five to six hours) and Manzini and Durban (US\$21, six hours). On many routes, you'll change minibuses at the border. Most long-distance taxis leave early in the morning.

GETTING AROUND

Bus & Minibus Taxi

There are a few infrequent (but cheap) domestic buses, most of which begin and terminate at the main stop in the centre of Mbabane. Generally you'll find minibus taxis are the best public transport, although they often run shorter routes. There are also nonshared (private hire) taxis in some of the larger towns.

Hitching

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country, and we don't recommend it. But in some parts of Africa there is often simply no other option to grabbing lifts on trucks, 4WDs, lorries or whatever vehicle happens to come down the road first. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk.

Hitching is easier here than in South Africa, as the skin colour of the driver and hitchhiker aren't factors in the decision to offer a lift. You will, however, have to wait a long time.

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